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IT WAS THE LOCOMOTIVE THAT BUILT THIS COUNTRY, YET CANADA LAGS BEHIND THE REST OF THE WORLD IN OFFERING HIGH-SPEED RAIL TRAVEL. COULD ALBERTA BE WHERE THE TRAIN GETS BACK ON TRACK?

ALL
ABOARD?

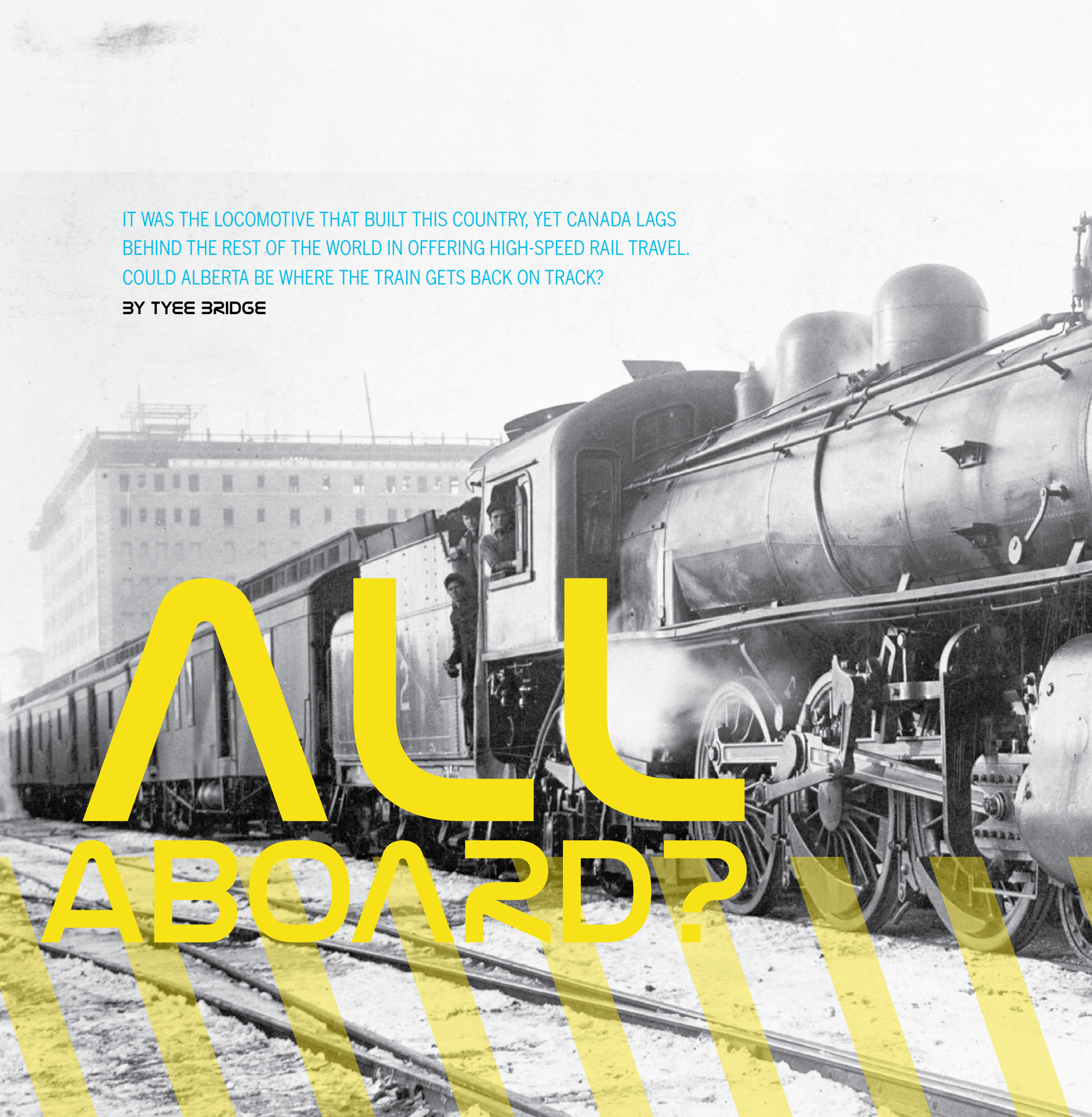
BY TYEE BRIDGE

More Fun Inside: The Fresh Scoop on MacKay's Ice Cream + Gourmet Meals on Wheels + Lantern Community Church's Fringe Appeal

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ALL ABOARD?





Ten minutes out of the station, the Rocky Mountaineer coach kerchunks pleasantly along at half-speed as we exit the city's industrial zone. There's no wildlife on this part of the trip, and nothing you'd regret missing with a good lens. Later, in the B.C. outback, passengers will keep their cameras in their laps, poised for someone to spot a bear or a bighorn sheep—but already here, at the beginning of the trip, passing through a wasteland of warehouses and vacant lots, I'm happy to be on the train.

Boarding a passenger train is like stepping into a respectable diner, or your local pub. You want to hang out there; it's a destination on wheels. You can walk the car aisles to the rear vestibule and hang over the outside railing, sniff the oncoming landscape like a dog. Train hijacks are not practical, so dinner comes with a glass of wine—real glass—and real silverware. Air travel is painfully sterile, even clinical, by comparison, a fidgety waiting game at 30,000 feet. The plastic food trays and drop-down oxygen masks make travelling on a 737 feel like spending time in the ICU. If rail travel is generally (but not always) slower, it doesn't require full-body security scans, lifejacket demonstrations, or being air-locked into a tube and kept alive with recirculated air.

"There is not much to say about most airplane journeys," Paul Theroux wrote in *The Old Patagonian Express*, his 1979 memoir of train travel through the Americas. "Anything remarkable must be disastrous, so you define a good flight by negatives. You didn't get hijacked, you didn't crash, you didn't throw up, you weren't late, you weren't nauseated by the food. So you are grateful." I dread turbulence in a plane, but I enjoy the clunky kinetics of traditional train travel—the sway of the car broken by a switch-rail lurch, the kerchunks dissipating as it passes onto smooth welded track. Given a choice I'd take high-speed rail over a flight. Airplane trips disappear from memory as soon as I get to my destination, but the times I've travelled by railroad stick with me. Even on a third-class Italian overnighter, where you can look into the toilet bowl and see railroad ties blurring past the outlet hole, you can't quite quash the romance of train travel. *Murder on the Orient Express* dies hard.

PHOTO COURTESY GLENBOW ARCHIVES



Taking the Mountaineer from Vancouver to Calgary, or vice versa—seated high in double-decker, glass-domed coaches, like CN’s Sceneramic cars from the ’60s—is not third-class. It’s a slow-travel throwback to the luxury rail tourism of Sir William Cornelius Van Horne, where passengers are doted on, fed scrambled eggs with smoked steelhead, and plied with wine and single-malt scotch. For those who can afford it, the Mountaineer gives a grand tour of the West, from the cranberry bogs of the Fraser Valley to the postcard-a-minute scenery of the Rockies. But this is a boutique, bucket-list sort of train trip, a domestic passage made exotic by the service, and by the premium price.

I took the same trip at age 12 from Vancouver to Banff on The Canadian—a VIA route that still runs west to east, though it now skips Banff and Calgary in favour of Jasper and Edmonton. I enjoyed it almost as much as my time on the Mountaineer, even though the feature dessert was a square of McCain’s Deep and Delicious frozen chocolate cake, recently thawed and popped out of the foil pan. Gourmet meals are not essential to train travel; even taking a commuter train like GO Transit in southern Ontario is a little vacation from highway gridlock, where you can drink your coffee, read a magazine and cast philosophical glances at the landscape. But whether it’s a regional commuter or the Rocky Mountaineer, a ride on a train in Canada leaves you wondering: what happened to rail travel here, and why can’t we have more of it?

Even taking a commuter train is a little vacation from highway gridlock, where you can drink your coffee, read a magazine and cast philosophical glances at the landscape.

WHY CANADA IS “NOT EVEN IN THE GAME”

When looking at the future of rail in Canada, it’s helpful—and a bit startling—to compare ourselves with other countries. Rail travel is a nostalgic holdover for most Canadians, rather than a preferred and highly modern mode of transit, as it is in Europe and Asia. Countries like France, Spain, Japan and China have put big money into expanding passenger rail in the past 50 years, but in North America train ridership has dwindled since the Second World War. Compared to the rest of the world, we look rail-phobic. The average person in France travels 1,350 kilometres by rail each year; in tiny, well-oiled Switzerland (where a late-running train could bring down a government) citizens travel an average of 2,350 kilometres by rail annually. And in Japan, home of the Shinkansen bullet train and the first country to build dedicated high-speed rail (HSR) tracks, the national average is the world’s highest at 3,100 kilometres per person.

Americans, in contrast, ride the rails an average of 120 kilometres per year—a number boosted by travellers on the continent’s only high-speed rail line, the Amtrak Acela Express which runs between Washington D.C. and New York City. In Canada, we don’t have a single HSR line and—unlike in the U.S., where earlier this year President Obama announced \$53 billion in funding over six years to spark the creation of new HSR lines—we have no federal leadership or policy on passenger rail. We average about 27 passenger-kilometres each per year, less than one-quarter of the U.S. average and one-hundredth that of Japan. “It’s not as if Canada and America are third or fifth in the world or anything like that,” said former diplomat Raymond Chretien, representing Quebec at a session on North American high-speed



rail partnerships in June. “We’re not even in the game.”

History has not been on the side of rail enthusiasts on this continent, at least not for the past 70 years. Canada and the U.S. subsidized massive nation-building railroad projects in the 19th and early 20th centuries, handing out millions of dollars in taxpayer-funded bonds and land grants; but in the ’50s, subsidies in North America shifted from railroads to building airport runways and massive road projects like the Trans-Canada Highway (started in 1950 and finished in 1971). Cars and trucks became the standard for hauling people and freight short distances between cities; planes took over for long-distance trips. The U.S. once had over 610,000 kilometres of freight and passenger track, but now has only 230,000 kilometres. Canada has about one-quarter of that, close to 50,000 kilometres.

Passenger rail service, particularly out West, is sparse. Since VIA Rail’s service to Calgary was severed in 1990 the Rocky Mountaineer is the last remaining passenger train serving the city. In Alberta you can still ride the old VIA Super Continental route as far west or east as you care to go—or for that matter, take a left at Winnipeg and head due north to Churchill—but first you have to get to Edmonton. This guarantees very few Calgarians will ever ride it. A Crown corporation formed in the late ’70s, VIA Rail is, like Amtrak, a vestigial but tenacious entity that has managed to keep passenger rail alive, handling about 93 percent of all such trips in Canada.

Traditional passenger trains of the sort provided by VIA are unlikely to make a major comeback here. You can blame the wide-open spaces between our cities, which make air travel faster and cheaper—and you can partly blame the fact that we don’t own our own tracks. Canadian railway

infrastructure is owned by freight providers Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and Canadian National Railways, among others, who are not always keen to share the steel ribbon. “We have a fundamental flaw in Canada that they don’t have in Europe: we privatized our rails,” says Paul Langan, of High Speed Rail Canada (HSRC), an Ontario-based non-profit advocacy group. “Traditionally in Canada the freight-rail companies see passenger-rail trains as a hindrance, and when we lost control of our rails, we lost a lot of our ability to determine our transportation future.” When passenger rail shares track with freight, freight takes priority, which means that travellers are often shunted off to a siding rail and kept at a standstill to allow cargo trains to pass. This can be part of the lazy charm of a scenic two-day tour like the Rocky Mountaineer, but it’s a serious impediment to a functional system of national passenger rail.

THE RETURN OF RAIL IN THE FORM OF AN ELECTRIC BULLET

We can hope that slow-travel trains will find the ridership to keep themselves going. But if we see a rail renaissance in our lives it will likely happen via the new generation of HSR trains that run at speeds of 220-320 km/h on dedicated, non-freight tracks. Between cities 200 to 1,000 kilometres apart—like Calgary and Edmonton, Vancouver and Seattle, or Los Angeles and San Francisco—high-speed rail can compete with cars and airplanes on the two fronts that matter most to travellers: time and price. High-speed rail blends the kinetic, eye-level pleasures of rail travel with the speeds of small aircraft. When you factor in all the delays of air travel, from security and boarding lineups at airports to the taxi or car commutes



required to get to them, time is on the side of high-speed trains, at least for trips of a thousand kilometres or less. A French TGV can travel the 1,067 kilometres from Calais to Marseille (the same distance from Calgary to Vancouver) in 3 hours and 29 minutes.

For a North American comparison of train versus plane, say you wanted to get from Washington D.C. to New York City. In mid-July of this year you could have taken an economy-class morning flight from Dulles to JFK—a driving distance of about 375 kilometres—for \$95 on JetBlue. The flight itself takes an hour and 15 minutes, but you can add at least two hours to that for commuting to and from the airport, check-in, security screens and other airport-based impedimenta. A business-class early-morning trip on the Acela Express, on the other hand, costs \$139, and offers a cafe car, a “quiet car” and a Wi-Fi, and lands you at Penn Station in midtown Manhattan in two hours and 45 minutes.

The train costs a bit more, but depending on the value you put on time and comfort, and on environmental efficiency, it’s an important option. Eurostar runs a high-speed train between London and Paris, and the company estimates that a business-class traveller using its train is responsible for less than one-tenth the CO₂ of one who takes a plane (8.2 versus 140.6 kilograms). Eurostar is powered in large part by electricity from French nuclear power plants, which, while non-CO₂ intensive, are not exactly an ecological

coup. Still, electric trains dangle the possibility of cleaner travel on a greener grid. (And to get really eco-technical, Eurostar’s own estimates don’t include emerging research on “radiative forcing,” which shows that plane emissions at altitude are 2.7 times more harmful to the atmosphere than emissions on the ground, which gives train travel an extra shade of green.)

Canada is the only country in the G8 that does not have high-speed rail, and the only country in the G20 in the past decade that has not committed to building a high-speed rail line. “Canada has reason to be embarrassed,” says HSRC’s Langan. “I mean, how far behind the rest of the world do you want to get?” He recalls a recent transportation conference he attended along with delegates from Spain, Germany and China, and having nothing to show in his presentation on high-speed rail in Canada except for some early-’70s film of the now-defunct CN TurboTrain (pictured above). Built by an aircraft manufacturer, the gas-turbine TurboTrain ran between 1968 and 1984, and holds the Canadian train speed record of 226 km/h. “That was the last time we had high-speed rail in this country, and now we’re 30 years behind what we used to have.”

According to Langan and other proponents, however, Albertans have the chance to turn that around. “There is such a positive opportunity in Alberta to do high-speed rail between Calgary and Edmonton,” he says. “I rarely run into someone who doesn’t want to see rail service restored there.”

THE CALGARY-EDMONTON “GREENFIELD ELECTRIC” LINE

Bill Cruickshanks is president and CEO of Alberta High-Speed Rail (AHSR), a group of investors and transportation planners that since 1999 has been angling to build and run the oft-discussed bullet train from Calgary to Edmonton. He’s been a rail enthusiast since he was a boy in Edinburgh, and a publisher of Canadian railway books—historical esoterica like *Canadian Pacific’s Mighty No. 8000* and *The Railways of Winnipeg, Vol 1: The Formative Years*—for over 30 years. A former bank manager for CIBC, he’s 72 years old, and speaks with a rolling Scottish accent.

“I don’t hear any comments saying this is not a good idea, not from government and not from people who live in the corridor,” says Cruickshanks. “There are 2.7 million people who live here, and more than enough traffic to make it run successfully.” He envisions the entire project being built out within six years of breaking ground, which he hopes will be soon. The project has been discussed by governments and rail enthusiasts since the early ’80s, but so far remains in limbo. The idea is simple but ambitious: an electric express train between Calgary and Edmonton (with a stop in Red Deer), known as the Greenfield Electric line, that could run at speeds of up to 300 km/h and get you from core to core in around 90 minutes. The twin tracks would parallel Highway 2—via a strip of land that would vary from 30 to 150 metres—and give travellers an alternative to flying or seasonally dangerous highway commutes. “A common complaint about the highway is that it’s tremendously busy,” Cruickshanks says. “I’m amazed coming back from Edmonton at night to see the strings of traffic coming in the opposite direction. Safety-wise it’s certainly not a quiet road anymore, and winter doesn’t help.”

The only country in the G8 that does not have a high-speed rail line, “Canada has reason to be embarrassed,” says Langan. “How far behind the rest of the world do you want to get?”

The recent tragic crash of a high-speed-rail passenger train run by Shanghai Railways in China raises fears about the safety of HSR, but it’s historically far less dangerous than travel by car, particularly when there are no “level crossings” where train tracks cross roads. (The Greenfield Electric line, as planned, would have no level crossings.) Like Langan, Cruickshanks is a bit surprised that the project hasn’t already begun, since just about everyone—the Alberta government, transportation-policy experts, and the general public—appears to be in favour of it. A 2007 poll in the *Calgary Herald* showed that 70 percent of respondents in Calgary and Edmonton would ride a “reasonably priced” high-speed train between the two cities, and 67 percent supported using public dollars to build it. A report issued last May by the Premier’s Council for Economic Strategy stated that Edmonton-Calgary high-speed rail would “serve as a practical backbone to create a thriving economic region” and “send a strong signal of Alberta’s commitment to environmental protection.” The Van Horne Institute (VHI), a transportation-policy and education centre at the University of Calgary, issued a report on the proposed HSR line in 2004, and even at that time the report concluded there were enough interested riders to support the Greenfield train.

Alex Metcalf, president of Ontario-based Transportation Economics and Management Systems (TEMS), has done “50 or 60” cost-benefit studies on proposed high-speed rail projects around the world. In 2008 he ana-



lyzed the Calgary-Edmonton HSR line for Alberta’s Ministry of Transportation, and calculated that revenues, resource and emissions savings and consumer surplus would amount to \$19.5 billion over 30 years for a 300 km/h TGV-style electric train. Metcalf thinks the project is feasible—finally. “I remember looking into this project in the ’80s for proponents in Alberta, and at the time I said, ‘You just don’t have a case here, guys, call me in 25 years,’” he says with a laugh. “And, sure enough, after I moved to Canada in about 2006 they gave me a call, around 25 years later, and now I do think they have a case. The population has doubled, and the opportunity for a successful line is there.”

Cruickshanks believes the Greenfield project could be built by the private corporations AHSR has spoken with—including rail-car manufacturers like Bombardier, Siemens and Hitachi—for about \$3 billion, without any public funding. Others believe the cost to be much higher, and that federal or provincial funding to kick-start the project is essential. “For higher-speed rail to happen, someone has to exercise leadership, assume some risk, and get the balls rolling,” said Richard Gilbert, a transportation consultant and co-author of the book *Transport Revolutions*, in a 2009 presentation to the House of Commons. “That has to be the federal government.” Gilbert says that the price for building HSR generally ranges between \$17 million and \$53 million per kilometre, and recommends \$40 million per kilometre as the best guideline, cur-

rently being used by proponents of the potential HSR system in California. If Gilbert is accurate, at a rough length of 295 kilometres, this would give the project a pricetag of about \$12 billion. But a relatively flat and unobstructed prairie, with very little need for elevated sections or tunnels, may be the most forgiving geography for this sort of project, and bring it in well below average. The Van Horne Institute's 2004 estimates, converted to today's dollars, predict the project would cost \$13.5 million per kilometre—about \$4 billion. "We brought in a quantity surveyor, a man with pretty eminent credentials, to check our numbers," says VHI president and CEO Peter Wallis. "We haven't revisited our calculations, but we stand by those numbers."

So what's holding the up the Greenfield Electric line? Partly delays resulting from the 2008 economic crisis, says Wallis. "No one had the appetite to think about supporting a railway for the past couple of years. Now I think there's going to be a lot more interest and activity." Also, while there may not be organized opposition, some rural communities and landowners are concerned about high-speed rail running through their backyard. The Greenfield tracks would cut off roads and lands along the route, making it more difficult for ranchers, farmers and emergency vehicles to get where they need to go—and possibly endangering wild animals that currently roam the area, including cougars, moose and elk. A 2009 study for the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties concluded there were ways to mitigate, if not eliminate, most of the concerns, but more city mice will benefit from an HSR line than country mice, and buying up private land for such projects, says Wallis, is "always a touchy thing in any jurisdiction."

How the project will be financed is the \$4-billion-to-\$12-billion question. Wallis believes, as does Paul Langan, that Alberta could learn a lot from countries in Asia and Europe about how to fund such projects with a mix of private and public money. Using tax dollars becomes a sticking point for many fiscal conservatives, Langan says, but it shouldn't. "Right-of-centre types try to stop rail projects here and in the U.S. by saying that taxpayer money shouldn't be used for this sort of thing. But we subsidize cars to an incredible degree as taxpayers. People don't know the cost of having a car-based society, and how much is coming out of their pocketbook."

This point is often dodged—or repressed—by opponents of new transit projects. Between 2006 and 2010, provincial and local governments in Canada spent almost \$89 billion on road and highway construction and maintenance, an average of over \$22 billion per year. This works out to about \$650 annually for every man, woman and child in the country, whether they drive a car or not. Regional decisions about transport infrastructure seem a bit dull and abstract until you do the math for your own household. Opting out is not easy, but the question is: do you want to be part-owner of a highways-only system, or would you like to add railways to your portfolio?

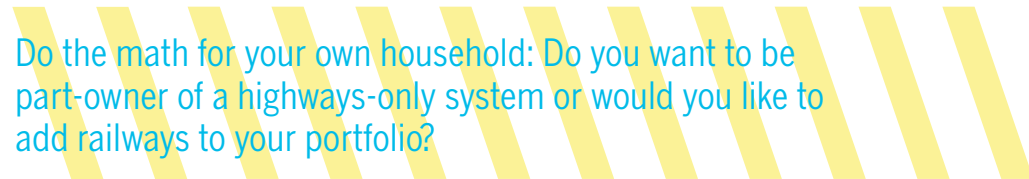
THE REAL PRICE OF A TICKET

If you ask people what they're really willing to pay for a 90-minute train trip from Calgary to Edmonton—what "reasonably priced" actually means—the usage numbers drop significantly from the 70 percent predicted by the *Herald* poll. The Van Horne Institute study in 2004 found that 41 percent of the corridor population would use high-speed rail if a round-trip ticket cost \$115 or less—about \$133 in today's dollars. But if and when the project is built, the price is unlikely to be quite that affordable. If it were in operation today, a round-trip on the Greenfield line would cost about

\$190, according to Bill Cruickshanks: more expensive than a Red Arrow bus ticket, cheaper than a WestJet flight. With this sort of price tag, the VHI study predicts that 13 percent of the corridor population would use it. If that sounds skimpy, consider that it comes to about 350,000 people and millions of corridor trips, which is nothing to sneeze at, in economic or ecological terms. "All you have to do is ask yourself as a Calgarian, when was the last time you were in Edmonton?" says VHI's Peter Wallis. "Then the penny begins to drop."

Alex Metcalf of TEMS predicts that if a 300 km/h electric train were in place after 2016, it would absorb 74 percent of personal trips via airplane in the corridor (930,000 trips), 42 percent of personal bus trips (just over 1 million) and three percent of auto trips (2.4 million). By 2021, says Metcalf, an Alberta HSR would handle over four million one-way passenger trips annually. This would add up to 1.4 billion passenger-kilometres of train travel, which would roughly double Canada's use of passenger rail, bumping us up as a nation from 27 kilometres per capita to about 55 kilometres.

Upping our rail-travel stats might make us feel more like the big kids in



Do the math for your own household: Do you want to be part-owner of a highways-only system or would you like to add railways to your portfolio?

Europe and Asia, but—setting convenience, economic benefits and pure railway-based pleasure aside—does high-speed rail make environmental sense? Cruickshanks estimates that a high-speed train would reduce overall emissions by the equivalent of 4.5 million metric tonnes of CO₂ over 30 years, with emissions from electricity production factored in. This is, as Cruickshanks and his colleagues admit, a "modest" ecological benefit, especially over such a long time frame: right now Alberta produces the equivalent of about 250 million tonnes of CO₂ per year. High-speed rail appears to be an eco-coup in terms of reducing tailpipe emissions by absorbing plane, bus and auto traffic, but the reality is less inspiring. Seventy-four percent of Alberta's power is generated from burning coal, and until the provincial grid is "greened" by switching to renewable energy like wind and solar, producing electricity for high-speed rail here will still mean significant point-source pollution.

What has yet to be done for the Greenfield line is a life-cycle assessment of the emissions produced by building it. Making a tonne of cement, for example, generates .83 tonnes of CO₂; global concrete use alone accounts for five percent of the world's annual output of greenhouse gas (GHG). (This is why California is considering low-carbon cement for major infrastructure projects, including high-speed rail.) This sort of emissions analysis is the next generation of ecological number-crunching, pioneered in the HSR realm by civil-engineering researcher Mikhail Chester. In 2010 Chester co-authored a symphonic assessment of the proposed California HSR line linking Sacramento, San Francisco, L.A. and San Diego—from the concrete and steel used in building the stations and railway tracks to the production of the line's electricity. When they compared the emissions produced in the building and operation of the Sacramento-San Diego line with GHGs produced in the manufacture and operation of cars and airplanes (including road and airport construction) in the same corridor, the results showed that high-speed rail has the edge, but is not an ecological

slam-dunk. Trains can definitely beat cars and planes on emissions, but only if enough people ride them.

“The takeaway from our work is that there are intelligent ways to design such a system, and there are poor ways,” Chester says. He warns that the California study shouldn’t be generalized to other corridors, noting that among other things it was based on 1,200-seat trains, and not the 400- to 600-seaters that would likely be used here. When asked about the relevance of the California system, Cruickshanks notes that the California line uses cement-intensive, earthquake-proof bridges and tunnels on 21 percent of its route, which would not be the case between Calgary and Edmonton. “I would be very cautious about projecting our results onto any Canadian system,” Chester says. “But if we spend money on high-speed rail, in most projects in general the intelligent ways to do it are to make sure it pulls into airports and downtown centres, and is integrated with existing transit.”

Put an Alberta HSR station outside of Calgary, Chester says, and you force an airport-style commute to the station, which will deal a death-blow to ridership. Ensuring it is “core to core” by linking city centres is key. The train could be made even more efficient by varying the number of coaches—to fit the time of day and expected ridership—and even by backing off on the accelerator. As transportation expert Richard Gilbert reported to the House of Commons, the 320 km/h trains typical in most of Europe use twice as much energy per kilometre as trains (such as those in Scandinavia) that travel at 225 km/h. “HSR is not a silver bullet in reducing CO² emissions. I think it could, I definitely think it could. But it has to be done well,” Chester says. “This means having conversations now that acknowledge the potential pitfalls, and making decisions that get HSR built most sustainably for the next century.”

A FUTURE THAT’S UP TO SPEED

A 90-minute TGV-style trip between Calgary and Edmonton is no slow-travel journey on the Rocky Mountaineer, and the future of rail in Alberta is not necessarily one that Cornelius Van Horne would recognize—although you could still pour yourself a dram of single-malt on the Greenfield line while you watched the prairie zip by. Still, a sleeker and faster future may not just be sleeker and faster, but more fun and, critically, less ecologically damaging. Given that traffic in the Edmonton-Calgary corridor is expected to increase by nearly 70 percent in the next decade, a well-designed HSR line running core-to-core will be a net benefit in environmental terms, and a better investment of public money than sinking it all into highway expansion.

As Alberta gradually shifts its grid to greater reliance on wind power and solar, a Greenfield electric train will become greener yet. And if things go here as they have in Asia and Europe, once citizens get a taste of high-speed rail, they’ll want more of it, and more affordably, with frequent trains and variable-class tickets. Ultimately fast trains should become less of a business-class option, as they are on the Acela line between Washington D.C. and New York, and more of a populist alternative, as they are in France, where policies of “TGV pour tous” boost ridership by offering discounts to students, seniors, families and people with medical conditions. In regional corridors like this one, Canada could make up for lost time and offer us more of the pleasure of rail, and less time spent in high-altitude airlocks or on white-knuckle highway commutes. To that possibility, Calgarians can raise a glass. **S**

A ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGHLIGHT



The Rocky Mountaineer runs three routes between B.C. and Alberta (and a short run between Whistler and Vancouver), but the one that allows Calgarians to step right onto a train, just like in the old VIA Rail days, is the First Passage to the West route. The two-day, daylight-only trip (passengers stay overnight in Kamloops) takes you into the Swiss-inspired engineering marvel in Yoho National Park called the Spiral Tunnels, through the craggy barrens of B.C. bighorn sheep and along the looming canyons of the Fraser River. This is the only passenger train left on this historic track—the section that joined Canada’s east and west when it was completed in 1885—and it takes you past Craigellachie, where the CPR’s Donald Smith drove the Last Spike.

There are three levels of service for the two-day trip: RedLeaf, SilverLeaf, and the premium GoldLeaf. Ticket prices for the First Passage to the West trip range from \$900 to \$1,900. For the full glass-domed coach experience and a throw-back to the old CN Sceneramic coaches of yore, splurge on the SilverLeaf or GoldLeaf ticket. **For more information, go to rockymountaineer.com.**